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HEADLINE: A greener vision for City Hall plaza;
Park: The storied War Memorial area is in for a \$1.5 million face-lift.

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BODY:

On a patch of downtown where stinky swampland gave way to Colonial-era gambling dens, where a war memorial rose and later fell on hard times, more change is on the way.

The city plans a \$1.5 million makeover for War Memorial Plaza, hoping to turn what mostly serves as a gathering place for homeless chess players into a more inviting "front lawn" for City Hall and the growing number of downtown apartment-dwellers.

Plans call for raising the sunken plaza closer to street level, adding a fountain and trees, and planting grass in the middle of what is now an almost completely paved city block.

"Downtown Baltimore is coming back to life. Creating a vibrant, street-level, green park where an underutilized, sunken concrete patch now exists will be another great addition to this city," Mayor Martin O'Malley said. "And just as importantly, it will be a far more fitting memorial tribute to our veterans."

The Board of Estimates is expected to award a \$1.5 million contract today to Allied Contractors to renovate the plaza, which is part of the city park system and is bounded by Holliday, East Fayette, Gay and East Lexington streets. If approved, the work is expected to begin early next month and be completed in 10 months.

Built in 1927 as a memorial to the 1,769 Marylanders who died in World War I, the plaza was designed by prominent Baltimore architect Lawrence Hall Fowler, who also drew the plans for the War Memorial Building that sits at the east side of the park, opposite City Hall.

Except for a few shrub beds and a double row of trees on two sides, the plaza is all cobblestones and aggregate concrete, laid out in a grid pattern intended to evoke a military cemetery. With a pair of concrete urns at one end and a fountain donated by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Maryland at the other, the memorial was criticized as a dour addition to downtown - even before it started to deteriorate.

"It was designed to look like a military cemetery. It's a little depressing," said Gennady Schwartz, chief of capital development for the city's Department of Recreation and Parks. "Everybody wants to see the space look better."

Under the design, the plaza will have a large lawn, new trees and nine new flower beds. The urns will be

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incorporated into the new park, as will parts of the fountain, which no longer operates. Plans call for a new fountain and occasional entertainment, such as jazz concerts.

The revamped park would be attractive not only to downtown office workers, who could lunch there in nice weather, but also to the growing number of people who live in nearby apartments, said Kirby Fowler, president of the Downtown Partnership.

About 7,500 people - mostly young professionals and empty-nesters - live in the area the partnership defines as downtown (between Mount Vernon, the waterfront, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and President Street). The number has doubled in the past five years and is expected to reach 10,000 by the end of this year, Fowler said.

"I think it would be amazing seeing residents of downtown, empty-nesters doing yoga and that kind of thing" in the new park, Fowler said. "It's just been such an inhospitable place. If you've ever stood in that park in the dead of summer, it's like an oven. It's full of stones that are hard to walk on. It's just not a pleasant place to be."

That patch of Baltimore has had more than its share of ups and downs.

Back in 1766, the land was part of a large, swampy tract known as Harrison's Marsh which, according to a report at that time, emitted such "noxious vapours and putrid effluvia" that the owners were ordered to drain it, according to the city's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

Drainage allowed the land to be developed, and what sprang up were racy attractions that could be considered the 18th-century equivalent of The Block, which today sits just a block away. While there might not have been strip joints, there was a notorious collection of gambling houses, dance halls and "wine rooms" - what amounted to "the most sporting section of one of the best sporting towns in the country," Baltimore magazine recalled in a November 1945 article.

By the 1880s, those colorful enterprises were replaced by commerce and light industry, which later gave way to the plaza.

"Although the memorial to the dead of WWI is impressive looking, both plaza and the building have long been subject to criticism because they are more ornamental than useful," said the Baltimore magazine piece. When the article was written, Maryland was thinking about honoring its World War II dead by building a far different sort of monument - a sports stadium.

There was an effort to make the plaza a center of fun from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, when William Donald Schaefer was mayor. Schaefer brought in concerts on weekends and food vendors at lunchtime during the week.

But most of those programs fell by the wayside in the early 1990s, and the plaza started showing its age.

Some of the paving has turned into rubble, and most of the people who spend time there are homeless men, who play chess at splintered wooden tables - and use the plaza as a toilet. That practice has made the area well known once again for "noxious vapours," which cleanup crews periodically try to address by dousing the place with disinfectant.

A similar problem has existed around the memorial building, where officials recently had trees and overgrown shrubs cut down so they would no longer provide cover for the homeless.

"In the summertime, you had to keep moving," said Tom Davis, state adjutant for the American Legion, which has offices in the memorial building. "They urinate and defecate. It's a health hazard. Surely we deserve something better than we've got there."

Davis is pleased that the city plans to renovate the plaza. But he is concerned about the addition of grass and other plantings because they will require more maintenance - and perhaps provide more cover for the homeless.

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"Unless they do something to curb the homeless residents in that area, it could turn out to be actually worse than it is now," he said. Kimberley A. Flowers, the city's recreation and parks director, said there is no plan to chase the homeless out of the plaza. But she said they will have fewer opportunities to use it as a bathroom if more people spend time in the park.

"The chess-playing has become part of the culture of that space," she said. The plan is "not necessarily to displace the homeless, but to encourage more than the homeless to take advantage of that space. We're hoping all groups will be a part of that space.

"Some might liken it to a Bryant Park," she added, referring to a New York City attraction. "There's a high homeless population, and city workers and moms with their kids. They all use the park."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) / MAP(S)

1. The War Memorial Plaza was laid out in a grid to evoke a military cemetery. "It's a little depressing," says the Department of Recreation and Parks' Gennady Schwartz. 2. An artist's rendering shows a transformed plaza - closer to street level and with a new fountain, grass and rows of trees. 3. Homeless people often congregate near the War Memorial Building across the street from City Hall. 4. War Memorial Plaza

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